

THE TWILIGHT GARDENER: A STORY BY GEORGIA WOOD PANGBORN

IHAD not seen Millicent Bradley for twenty years when I was told that she had a year-round place not far from the hotel where I was spending the summer. So I motored over there, arriving about seven at the end of a hot August day, with still a good two hours of dwindling daylight and pleasant dusk in which to sit about and talk of things.

I had heard rumors that she and her husband had not been fortunate, but the details of their trouble had escaped me. Just a general impression that it had been very bad indeed with them and no fault of their own. But twenty years is a long time. I had my own family. It seemed a great distance back to Millicent and there were nearer troubles than hers to be sorry for.

But as she met me at the gate, her face was shadowed so that I did not at once see the years, and there was something about that gate, and about the house behind her, and about the flowing line of mountains back of it, that at first seemed familiar and right as could be. It was not until she had taken me around to the garden exactly as she had always done in the old days that I realized there was anything strange in its familiarity and rightness, and that I was looking at a house and garden which according to the map should be many miles away, or rather which should not exist at all but were as gone as Nineveh and Babylon, their place long since taken by some unlovely thing, a tobacco factory, I think.

I passed my hand across my eyes and looked again. I was not mistaken. It was Millicent's old home, exactly as it had been when she and I were girls together.

Yet not quite, because a little creature in a dull blue frock—that odd blue that lights up at dusk—carrying a doll under her elbow, now shyly came into the gathered folds of Millicent's skirts, and thence peeped out doubtfully at me like a chicken from a hen's feathers.

But for this little person, it was an evening out of our girlhood. The replica was exact, the low roof among its trees, the rows of planted things, even to the smell of winy petunias and the rustle of excited kittens in the grass.

We sat on a rustic bench under an apple tree, and an apple plumped into my lap. I tasted it and my mouth was puckered by the sharp spice of an astrachan.

"You have a lovely garden," I said stupidly. I was strangely thrilled. My heart beat thickly and the smart of tears was behind my eyes.

THE TWILIGHT GARDENER

The kittens chased each other up and down the path before us with noiseless ferocity, hid tigerishly in thickets of phlox and made dashes into the crisp forest of corn. The little person in blue who had also been maneuvering in the corn came out, talking sociably, though not to us.

Millicent, lifting a finger for silence, bent forward to listen, but it was an indistinguishable murmur, sweetly unintelligible and kindly and optimistic. I think she was reassuring her doll upon some matter. She kept on to the end of the path and there sat down, a dot of luminous blue.

Millicent leaned back with a sigh.

"And you know," said she in a curious tone, "that used to be her 'Afraid Place.' I used to have one at the end of our garden—until—until my father found it out and took to sitting there with me for our story telling."

"Children always have those strange places of terror," I spoke from experience of four.

Her eyes did not leave the child as she went on:

"Yes, I made the garden. The house was already like our old one. I suppose the design was a popular one at the time of their building. There are very probably a number of other duplicates scattered through the State. The trees I had set out. We have been here four years and they have just come into bearing. In a few years more when they are larger it will seem even more like the old place.

"I do all the work of the garden except the ploughing."

I looked my surprise at the tall rows of corn and the rich green luxuriance of the potatoes, the soldierly phalanx of staked tomatoes.

"It's not so hard—not really. And it keeps one's mind off things that thinking about won't help. Jason can't be here to do it. It's just part of my job of holding the fort until we can be together again. And you know it's quite splendid how fine a table I can set for Milly and me. My father——"

She hesitated, then went on abruptly.

"MY father had a wonderful garden, you may remember. There were six of us and he raised plenty of vegetables and fruit for us all. He was an old man and not strong. I am as strong now as he was. He and I were great chums. I was the youngest. Until I started this garden I had no idea of how much I had unconsciously learned from him, just by following around and watching and getting in his way. But, you see, it *is* a garden. Enough for us. The first year it was a jumble.

THE TWILIGHT GARDENER

I planted things too close and they smothered each other. But after that it took shape. I learned and I remembered things."

"But," I looked about wonderingly, "it is magic. I have been set down in *that* garden. And this evening is twenty years ago."

I looked back at the house.

"I keep expecting your mother to call you because she is afraid the grass is wet. I seem to hear your father walking up and down that other path that is hidden from us by the corn."

"No, he would not be there now," said she dreamily. "He was for a while, but now he would be with Milly."

She caught her breath with a half laugh.

"Don't look so startled. I am very much alone here but for Milly, and one gets fancies. Of course, having made *his* garden flourish again—and I really think I have at last—I seem to feel him in it, too. It is as if we had really worked together. Often and often he has seemed to be bending over the plants with me and my thoughts run as if I were talking to him or he to me—planning, advising.

"Our anxiety has been very great—moments when I have been afraid my reason would not hold. But when we took this house with the mountains at the back it seemed like coming home—as if there must be kindness somewhere within it for Milly and me. And gradually as it has taken on *that* likeness more and more, the fancy has grown.

"And I am beginning to understand what his garden must have meant to him. In his old age, after disappointments. He had been very ambitious and brilliant in his youth. The garden became his career, and now—after Milly—it is mine. One can love a garden. I know why they call the earth 'Mother.'"

"Ah," she broke out suddenly, "why should I mind admitting that I believe—believe—" She stopped and shook her head. "But one does mind admitting. One believes, but one does not admit one's belief—even to one's self—not quite. Only—a strange thing happened. Milly's 'Afraid Place'—you see her now?"

The blue dress at the end of the path glowed like a turquoise through the dusk.

"Only last evening, just about this time. She had been sitting there just like that, and when I called her for bed she came back, talking to her doll—not to me! *We* never know them, but talking to her doll, and she was telling it a story.

"You know, he used to tell me stories—amazing ones, and mostly they were about a little black boy named Sammy who had a good old lion for a pet, and whatever he did, or into whatever

THE TWILIGHT GARDENER

terrible dangers he came, this creature was with him like Mary's little lamb. Oh, it went on, you know, this Sammy story, as stories will when one tells them to order for a child—just on and on—it was a thing that was just between him and me. Nobody else got any of that story.

"And *that* was the story Milly was telling her doll. No, I had never told it to her. Brownies have always been the subject matter of the stories I have told her. Yes, it was Sammy and his good old lion."

Millicent's eyes widened and shone like a moth's through the shadow. Her voice thrilled and shook.

"I asked her where she got the story and she claimed she had made it up. I tried to question her a little more, but no—she dribbled off exasperatingly into other things and there was no getting anything out of her at all.

"It's after her bedtime—let's go up quietly——"

The small figure sat on a boulder, chin upon reflective palm, looking off, apparently, at the mountains, shimmering under the just risen moon. There was an eldritch creaking of autumnal insects all about and the kittens were still busy in the corn. That utterly sweet breeze that comes at the end of a hot day was flowing smoothly over the garden.

"What are you doing, dear?" asked the mother at last, after we had stood for a long moment looking down at her.

The little thing rose and sleepily put up her arms to be taken.

"Telling the Sammy story," she piped.

"You see," said Millicent in a shaken voice, looking wistfully about.

She lifted Milly to her shoulder and turned to the house.

The mystery of twilight was upon everything. It was not difficult to fancy another presence. One felt it not impossible that invisible, kindly eyes might be observing us.

As Millicent walked ahead of me the little girl's head was upon her shoulder, facing me with a sleepy droop.

Suddenly she roused and waved her hand as if in farewell. Had I chosen I might have fancied it merely a friendly salute to me.

But I am sure that it was not upon me that her eyes rested.